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DEPT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR RJACHIM/SRAMESH

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR IS SA

SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH MEETS WITH PALESTINIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD ABBAS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met with King Abdullah on September 11 to discuss the ongoing Palestinian crisis. According to the Saudi Press Agency, the King and President Abbas also discussed ways to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process. Palestinian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Jamal Al-Shobaki noted in a statement on September 10 that Abbas would tell King Abdullah that he supports the Mecca Agreement and believes it still offers a plausible solution for working through differences with Hamas. Al-Shobaki caveated this by saying that a return to the Mecca Agreement is predicated upon Hamas ceding control of the Gaza Strip. Al-Shobaki also reported that Abbas planned to brief the King on preparations for the proposed November Peace Conference.

¶2. (U) Press reports also indicated that Hamas leader Ismail Haniyah released a statement on September 10 asking Abbas to agree to a joint meeting in Saudi Arabia. According to these reports, Hamas is ready to "return to a dialogue without conditions." In a statement to the press following his meeting with King Abdullah, Abbas reiterated his position that there would not be any dialogue with Hamas until the situation in Gaza returns to what it was prior to the "coup" in mid-June 2007. Abbas also told reporters that he discussed the situation in Gaza with King Abdullah, but did not provide any details. Abbas said the King acknowledged the need for conference participants to make "measurable progress" to prevent it from becoming just another "photo opportunity." He also said the King agreed that the conference needs to involve all interested parties, including Syria and Lebanon.

¶3. (U) Saudi media coverage of the King's meeting with President Abbas was pro forma, with little substance; however, in a press conference on September 12, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal spelled out the SAG's position on the November Peace Conference as it was discussed during the meetings between the King and Abbas. Al-Faisal stated that the conference needs to focus on the fundamental topics of Jerusalem, borders, and refugees, adding that the participants should produce a timetable to address these issues. Otherwise, he said, the conference will be "worthless." The Foreign Minister also said that Israel needs to take measurable action to show that it is serious if it wants the conference to succeed.

¶4. (C) Public reaction to the King's meeting with Abbas was muted. One interlocutor, who lives in Riyadh's Palestinian community, suggested that the primary purpose of Abbas' meeting with the King was to mend fences with the SAG and

request the King's assistance in pressuring Hamas to cede control of the Gaza Strip. An editorial printed in the on-line version of Al-Madina Newspaper on September 12 praised the visit as a "smart move" on behalf of the Palestinian President. The author claimed that the meeting served the dual purpose of highlighting the SAG's influential powers as a regional peace broker, while keeping the King informed of Abbas' activity and progress in preparation for the November Peace Conference.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The muted coverage of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' meeting with King Abdullah is a clear reflection of the Saudi monarch's continuing displeasure with the Palestinians' failure to honor the Mecca Accord. As author of the Arab League's Middle East Peace Initiative, King Abdullah has staked his personal reputation and the prestige of the Kingdom on achieving a fair and balanced resolution to the Arab/Israeli problem. Compounding the King's clear personal investment in this issue is his profound sense of bruised personal honor and impatience and disdain for those who violate their promises and vows. Despite these sentiments, the King and his government seem to be moving toward re-engagement with the Palestinian Authority. The King's willingness to meet with Abbas appears to be an indicator of such a shift. While the Saudis remain angry with the Palestinians, they know that leaving Fatah without any support (political and financial) is simply not an option -- particularly as Iran seeks more opportunities to ingratiate itself with Hamas. END COMMENT.

FRAKER